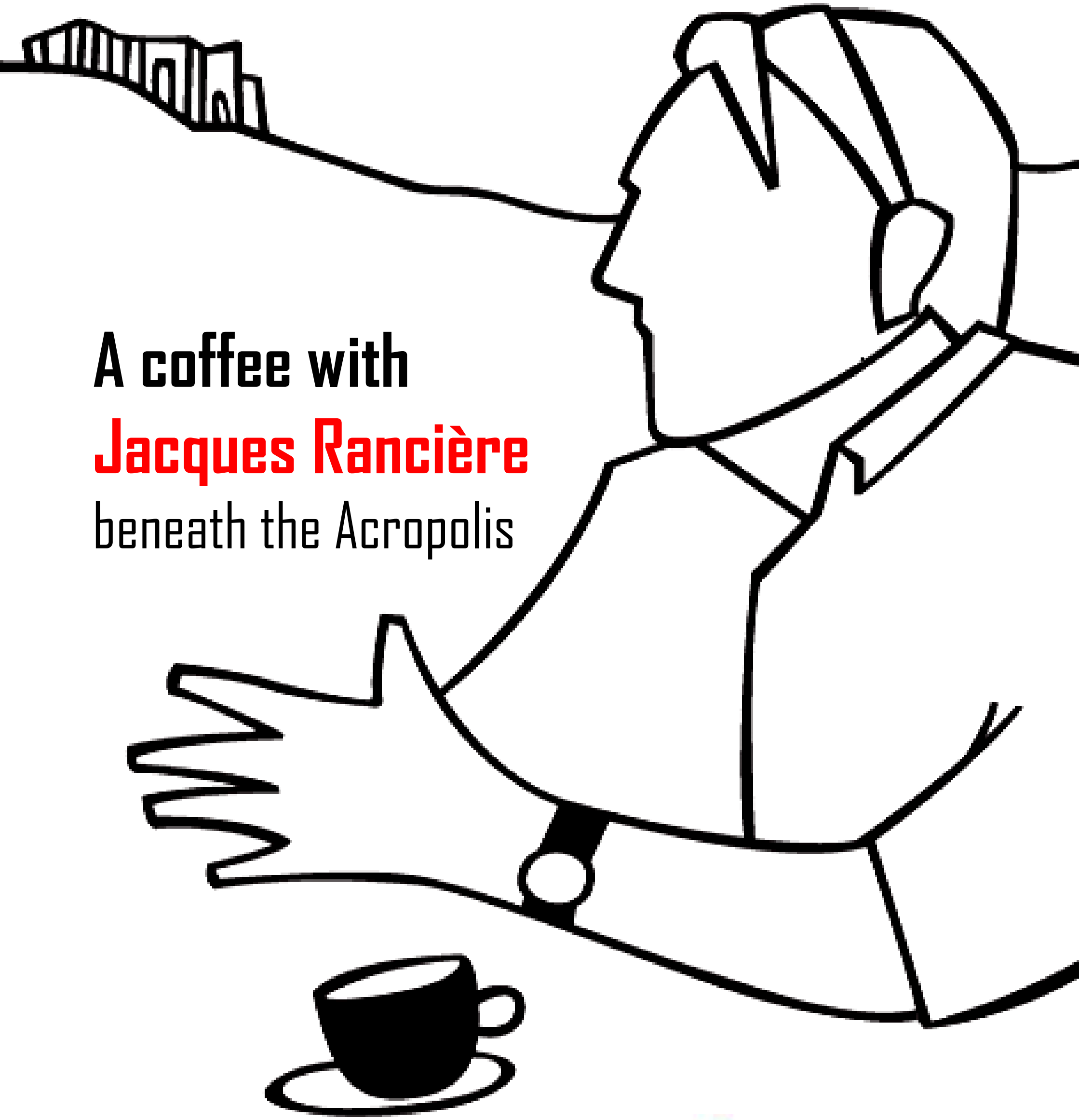
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A coffee with Jacques Rancière beneath the Acropolis

(A Conversation with J. Rancière and Yannis Ktenas, Alexandros Schismenos, Yavor Tarinski, Nikos Ioannou, Nikos Katsiaounis, Ioanna Maravelidi, from the editorial team of Babylonia, during B-Fest 6, 2017)

Y.K. So, Mr. R I would like to ask you something. I was really interested in what you said last night[1] about the working class and its transformation we experience in our time. You spoke not about the vanishing, but about the displacement of labor. And I think that this is really interesting because, like other radical democratic thinkers, you do not support an ontological and essentialist approach to the proletariat, but rather you see the proletariat as the result of the relationships in the industry. It was not an ontological privilege, but rather the new forms of relationships inside the big factories that made the working class a potentially revolutionary subject. Furthermore, you told that, back in the days of your youth, the proletariat corresponded to a kind of empirical reality; you could literally point out to it. Nowadays, this condition has changed. What do you think about that?

J.R. Yes, but at the same time my approach is a non-sociological approach. What I think, what I tried to say in the Nights,[2] is that notions like the proletariat, the working class, workers, working class

[1] J. Rancière's discourse had taken place the previous night, Saturday 27/5/2017.

[2] Reference to his book *Proletarian nights* (1981).

movements don't designate real sociological groups . Instead they are the result of modes of symbolization of a form of being-in-common. So I always try to make a clear distinction between the proletariat as a sociological reality and the proletariat as the result of a kind of symbolical invention of the collective. My point is that, in the Marxist tradition, there was a kind of identification between the two, between the symbolical construction and the sociological reality. That's why I said that there was a time when you could designate the proletariat as the people coming out of the big factories, like Renault in France. In May 68 the rebellious students went to the gates of the Renault because it was where the proletariat was. This meant a kind of identification between the concept and the reality. This kind of identification is no longer possible. This doesn't mean that work does not exist anymore, that material work has disappeared, that is not true, but this kind of identification is no longer possible. And this is, in a way, why there is this kind of emphasis on the idea of creating new forms of community, as a kind of substitute to that kind of existing reality of the working class community.

A.S. We see a decline in the power of the nation-state. Political decisions are no longer made by small governments, like in Greece, whereas even in France or in the USA transnational interests dominate. Which form of struggle should we use? Because, in Greece, I think that one of the points that the "left" government proved is that you cannot change anything by these governmental procedures. So, how could people represent themselves in a direct way?

J.R. I don't agree with the idea that the nation-states are declining, because this separate power of international institutions, is at the same time in a close relationship with the nation-states themselves. When our governments say they are obliged to do something because of the European Union, the World Bank or the IMF, this is a manipulation in order to thwart the resistance in their own country. So, I think that we must not really trust the governments when they

say “we can’t do anything”, because they can do a lot of things. If you think of what has happened in Europe, there are many countries which in fact don’t obey the rules of the EU. So, I think that there is a danger in the idea that now the power is no more where we live, the power is in some isolated places, so that the movement should be in those places. It was what happened, for example, with the protests in Seattle or in Genova. It is the idea that now nothing can be done in the places where we are. I don’t think this is true and I think that it has a demoralizing effect.

I think that when you struggle in a definite country, you still struggle against your government and against the fact that your government is part of a global government. My point is that politics is always local in a way. People rally in a definite place to deal with a specific conflictual matter. if you say that politics must become international, global, this is kind of the end of politics. Of course, you can make big protests when there is a meeting of this or that international organization, but I think it does really produce effects. What is important is not to fake a kind of international direct popular movement, but really strengthen local movements and possibly try to make some kind of alliance of all those movements. What was important in the recent movements, the occupy movement, the movements of the squares or the parks is that they emphasized the fact that people gather in specific places to address a specific situation against a specific enemy.

I think that is important, in spite of all limitations: you have to start from the point that there is something happening here, that you have to react here, by creating some kind of specific time-space.

A.S. Our experience in Greece was that the social movement rose when it found roots in specific localities, specific communities, for example communities fighting for ecological reasons against companies etc. But this rooting of the people on the ground, I think you are right, it is necessary for democracy.

Y.T. I would like to seize the opportunity, now that the dialogue has reached this point, on local struggles and social movements. We see that today, we can say, I would certainly say, that, traditional ideologies that set up a final goal like communism, anarchism, socialism seem to be unable today to mobilize popular support, like they were doing in the past. At the same time, certainly we see democracy being constantly recalled by people that do not set it as a final goal, but as a "here and a now", as a way of intervening in their everyday lives. What is your opinion on this and do you think that one of the most crucial things today is try to reinvent what democracy means? To reframe it. To make it refer to certain roots.

J.R. I think that perhaps now we must overstep the division between the ephemeral and the enduring, and at the same time also perhaps between the local or the specific and the general. Because there is this tradition, if you look back, there are some local, specific forms of problem, of struggles, that must be synthesized, of course mostly in the form of the party. So there is always this idea that there is the particular and the universal.

Instead I think what is really important in the recent movements is that the universal is at stake in local problems and local movements. For instance what was significant in the occupation of Gezi Park in Istanbul is the fact that a very local and apparently unimportant thing, about the destination of a place, could be precisely something immediately universal, dealing with the question to whom does space belong: What does it mean really to be in a public space? Either the space is meant for people, or it is meant for the building trade, hypermarkets and so on. What was at stake is the idea of availability of space for everyone and for indeterminate uses against the idea of always giving to space and time a particular destination.

Well, for me it was impressive and I think that now what has been important in the recent movements is precisely the emphasis on the form of the movement. The idea that the question of the universal is really at play in the very form of the movement. So, it is not the specific object of the struggle against a power that is either particular or universal. The point is whether you deal with it in a particular or universal way. Particular, meaning that I am interested in this or that kind of fight and universal, meaning that I think that in this particular thing there is a question concerning the way in which we live and that it has to be dealt with, not from the point of view of this or that identity but by trying to make it universal and dealing with it in a way that presupposes a capacity of everyone. What I find interesting in recent movements is that they also question identity politics that has become so important recently. Against the mission of the party, etc. etc. there was this rise of identity politics. But I think identity politics is also a kind of dead end. And what I found significant in the movements of the 2010s is the fact that people were in the street or in the parks, due to their own involvement, their own commitment to this or that struggle (ecological, feminist, antiracist , antiauthoritarian or else) . But also they were gathered by this "specific" conflict that concerned anybody at all so that the dynamic of the movement was not that of an addition of identities.

A.S. Just to continue on that question, we see that these movements form another public space that doesn't belong to the State, doesn't belong to the private capital. But it is fragile. It is, as you say, when the people appear in this public space it transforms, it becomes something else: a cell of another community. But it is fragile. How could it be maintained, in your opinion? A public space outside the State, outside private capital. And what's your opinion about Nuit Debout. Was it like that?

Y.T. Because we saw it from a distance.

A.S. We saw it from a distance. One thing that was significant about Nuit Debout was that experiment with temporal change, the change of the diary.

J.R. Yes, of course. Nuit Debout had a strong resonance for me because I had written on the ”proletarian nights” of the past. What this relation to the night meant is that the movement was not simply a movement against the governmental measures, the governmental decision, but also a way of reframing the space and time of the being-in-common. It started from a struggle against a governmental reform of the Labor code but it became more than a “social conflict”, a mere opposition of forces; it became an opposition between two worlds: a world where work defines a community and a world where it is only an individual affair. It is not incidental then that it resulted in a movement claiming to stand up during the night like the 19th century proletarians who decided to break the normal way which consisted in working during the day and sleeping at night. Along with this idea was another idea which I found quite exciting of changing the calendar: the movement had started in March and it should go on in March so that after March 31st, there should not come April 1st, but March 32nd, 33rd etc. etc. Well, I think there is something important, which is part of all those movements of the squares, the idea precisely of a subversion of the normal use of space and time. Normally protesters march in the streets and shout slogans against the government. But the militants of the occupy movements break away with this use of space.

Instead they used the public space to create the forms of spatialization and temporalization proper to an autonomous movement. But, at the same time, of course, it is true that it can become all formal in the bad sense of the word. When I went to look at what was happening at Nuit Debout, I saw that there were assemblies with no power of decision. The purpose of the assembly was that everybody was allowed to speak, so I remember for instance one night there was one person coming to speak about Marxism, saying why Marxism is important, and

then another person saying “I am anti-speciesist” and I will explain you what anti-speciesism means, then there was another person coming for the rights of the migrants. So, it is OK, because everybody can speak. But it is not really an assembly about a decision, about something to do, to do in common.

That is why, slowly, there was a decrease of the movement. Of course, people were happy, there were many young people and they were happy to be allowed to speak. But, at the same time, it did not produce a real political assembly.

A.S. Something like that happened also at the Syntagma square, where the assemblies decided to reorganize the square, they managed to do that, they managed to defend the square, but then they found out that their decisions reached only as far as that, the square. So it was more like an agora than a political assembly.

N.I. Putting the movements aside, let’s talk about another field, a field that traditionally is not thought to be political. In my village, a mountainous village on the Greek island of Lefkas there is a group of people that want to create a traditional product and they organize themselves, their production and their lives on a democratic and horizontal way, like a cooperative. When they try to find the materials for their production, they can find them globally, through the internet, from many different places in the world. When their product is made, they can find a market also globally, through the internet, in many places of the world. But their activity is monitored and controlled by a local, national financial agency and a local, national taxation system. So, how could such communities of a democratic production that are local, but also refer to the global field, expand, since the whole economic system in which they participate is above them? Perhaps we could see democracy nowadays as a combination of local democracy through our everyday experience and global democracy for things that go beyond this corporeal everyday experience, like the things that we

discussed before. Perhaps democracy nowadays is a combination of the local and the global, with the removal of the national.

J.R. Well, I agree, but at the same time I think this tension between the local and the global is not necessary, because there are examples of local cooperative production that find forms of distribution through cooperatives of consumers , democratic groups or social spaces. There is not only the relation of subordination to the global market, but also attempts to create networks so that there is no opposition between the form of the production and the form of distribution and consumption. But what is also interesting in this is this kind of displacement of the idea of democracy, the idea that democracy is really at stake, not simply in what is called political assemblies, political groups, but in all forms of life. What I find interesting is the concept of the free social space, though of course free social space can mean a lot of different things. It is the idea that you do not have on the one hand the economy, the economical or the social and, on the other hand, the political, that precisely democracy is about making concrete decisions and those decisions can concern forms of material production, but also forms of intellectual activity and so on.

Y.K. Like what you said last night, concerning a reunion of the spheres of social life.

J.R. Yes.

Y.K. They shouldn't be distinct, the economical, the political, the social, but democracy should go through all of them, something like that.

J.R. Yes, something like that. Of course, we cannot imagine that we are destroying here and now the division of labor, but I think that, yes, we can see this in the recent movements and notably precisely in this kind of rooting of the movements in specific forms of action: at the same time, everybody attended from the local and from the specific to break

with the division of spheres. And this, in a way is the paradox of the present that perhaps starting from the specific there is a kind of opening, a kind of breaking and of disruption of the strict division of labor, the division of spheres.

Y.T. I want to comment on this last thing that you said that democracy will require the integration of all spheres of human life. You made a similar point in Proletarian Nights, where you say that the real threat to the bureaucratic logic that wants to fragment our existence into separated, semi-independent spheres was the people that transcend their role as workers with their practices as thinkers, as poets and so on. Furthermore, you also spoke a little bit earlier about the nation-state that still plays its role and the bureaucracy that still exists. Although today bureaucracy is represented as something that is slowly dying along with the State as a result of the coming of the more chaotic, the more “anarchic” market, I think that actually the private sphere also resembles pretty much to the State today, it is heavily bureaucratized. So, should our critique emphasize more on bureaucracy than it is today? Actually many movements don’t criticize so much bureaucracy anymore and this fragmentation of human life.

J.R. Well, we should really question the idea of neoliberalism, as being only the reign of the free market, individualism and so on. Because, what is called neoliberalism doesn’t mean at all that everybody do as they like, no. In fact, it entails a multiplicity of new regulations and norms. If you think, for instance, the European Treaty, it is not only to find what you can do just to unify the economic and social systems of various countries, no. There is a global prescription: you must destroy the public services, you must destroy those forms of redistribution o, f wealth in favor of the poor because it is against the liberal logic. I propose, rather than speaking of neoliberalism, to speak about absolute capitalism, meaning that the law of the market must be the law of every form of activity. This does not mean at all that everything becomes free, that everybody can do what they like, not at all. In fact,

capitalism has become a form of state, a bureaucratic form of organization and regulation of life. So, I think that it is very important to stress this point, because so many people are still fighting neoliberalism and they treat it only as the reign of individualism and free market. But, no, it is not free, it is not freedom. And it is not a question of opposing freedom to equality. It is one of the aspects on which I have always insisted.

Y.K. I would like now to pose a question on a very hot topic of nowadays, the Internet. In some interviews you have expressed yourself in a positive manner about it and this has to do, I believe, with some egalitarian elements that exist in the way the knowledge is constructed in the Internet: we have equal access to information, etc. I would like to know what you think about the recent conversation regarding post-truth and fake news.

J.R. The point is there has always been fake news. In the past, even some revolutions were born of fake news. So we should not consider fake news as a specificity of the Internet. It is true, of course, that the Internet allows fake news to grow very quickly, but, at the same time, the possibility of denouncing fake news grows at the same speed. The point with the Internet is that, first, it is true that we have this kind of access to knowledge, which is very important and probably the people of your generation don't realize what it means. But, for my generation it is something quite important. In France there was a polemic, with intellectuals saying that the Internet means too much information, people cannot deal with it, it is very dangerous, etc. etc. It was in part the reaction from the academic world, because they were losing their authority. This democratization of the access to knowledge is very important. At the same time I think that the idea that the Internet is creating a kind of overall democracy is also a fancy.

I am always really perplexed before this twofold aspect of the Internet. On the one hand, free access to information, but at the same time,

when you read comments on the Internet, you totally despair about the humankind. (Laughs)

So, I think you cannot have a global view of the effect of the Internet, but I don’t think at all that the freedom of access means a kind of state of post-truth or relativism, no. It does not create fake news by itself though it gives new instruments for their propagation.

A.S. And we know, to continue on the topic of the Internet, we saw the movements in recent years using the communicational tools of the Internet, in Gezi Park, for example in Istanbul, to promote their views and to communicate with other communities in struggle. For example, it was impressive that during the Gezi riots Erdogan’s regime tried to block the Internet. In Athens, the Occupy Syntagma square came out from Internet communication. So, could we see imaginary communities, communities of communication being formed as a form of digital democracy, communicating struggles, communicating the peoples’ views, not the State’s?

J.R. You know, the peoples’ views, it means a lot of different things. The problem is, and this is why I consider the form of the movement to be very important, that most of the tools, most of the forms of protest now can be used by quite different and opposite forces. For instance, you can think of Nuit Debout, on the one hand, and you can also think of all those forms of protest of the far-right, on the other hand. In France, for example, when there was a law about same sex marriage, there was a huge movement against it. They called it, in reference to the Arab Spring, the French Spring.[3] The French Spring was supposed to be a kind of movement similar to the Arab Spring, to the movements of the squares and they even made an attempt to put

[3] In 2013, Hollande’s government has launched a law that permitted the marriage of people of the same sex. The anti-gay marriage protesters have named their movement *Le Printemps Français*.

tents and occupy the street. It did not succeed but it created a real confusion. And in the Internet you can see all sort of communication between all kinds of far-right movements, ideologists and journals. You discover in the Internet how many far-right groups exist. And it is true that the Internet also sometimes gets them to a certain power. In the French presidential election, the far-right, far-right movements, far-right platforms, were acting, not only supporting Marine Le Pen and the far-right, but also supporting Fillon and the traditional and respectable right-wing. So, we could see that the Internet, the new forms of communication, were also helping these movements and making them exist as a force. So, it appears that forms of free diffusion don't mean by themselves the increase of democracy. Democracy is not communication.

Y.T. Since you have mentioned the far-right, I think that a question that should also be a part of our discussion is that we see recently, in the last years, that the main challenger to the far-right seems to be the liberals. Like in America, in the U.S., Hillary Clinton assumed the role as the main contester against the far-right and in France it was the banker Macron against Le Pen. In England also, pro-EU protesters mostly at the center, were against the Brexiters that were considered to be more at the far-right. But this seems to be a dead end, because these liberals are advocates of the very system that has strengthen the far-right. 15 years ago Chirac won the elections against Le Pen senior, but now his daughter, Marine Le Pen, won double votes than her father. So, it is getting stronger, obviously this answer does not work. How do you think that we should challenge this great threat that is the far-right?

J.R. My point is that the far-right in fact covers very different forms of organization and of public opinion. Of course, in Greece you really have a fascist party, which is partly infiltrating the police and the army. There is a kind of tradition of the far-right which began in the 1920s, the far-right that was organized as a sort of militia against communism, against the workers' movement, etc. etc. There is this kind of militant,

active and possibly militarized far-right. And there is also a form of far-right opinion which mostly just remains a form of public opinion, meaning people who vote against the migrants, against the strangers, etc. etc. but are not organized to fight in the streets and to attack the migrants, for instance. So I think really there is a distinction. What I think is significant in countries like France is the fact that the far-right as a kind of military force is not so much strong, but there is a widespread opinion saying "well, there are too many strangers, they cannot really be assimilated". It does not really enhance some kind of military fascist force, but it does create a phenomenon of opinion where people are happy to say that there are too many strangers, too many migrants, too many problems with migrants etc. But it is something that happens, I would say, in the electoral world and not against it. In France, for instance, the far-right is much more a kind of electoral thing.

Y.K. Expressed through Le Pen, for example.

J.R. Yes, expressed through Le Pen. But also, what I tried to do is show that there was a kind of strange play between the far-right and the official right and left-wing parties. Because, from the 1990s in France there has been this kind of discourse of the big parties saying, "There is a real problem with migrants. Of course, we are anti-racist, anti-fascist etc. etc., but precisely for this reason we must not accept too many foreigners, too many migrants, because it might help the far-right". So, I think there is a kind of game being played between the top of the State and the public opinion. The governments and also the media produce a kind of soft xenophobic and anti-islamic opinion. I tried from the very beginning to say that there is some kind of new form of racism, a racism coming from the top. It is important to emphasize it because there is always the idea that racism comes from the bottom, comes from poor people that have lost their job and are against the migrants because they are afraid, because they are poor people without instruction, etc. etc. I opposed to that cliché the reality of a

new racism coming from the top of the State that I called soft racism or cold racism. It went through administrative measures limiting the access to the territory and through forms of discursive legitimization of those measures. It was also supported, notably in France, by a strong intellectual movement, which was supposed to be leftist, republican, that was against migrants because, as Moslems , they ignore the republican principles of secularism and threaten our secular state and our secular way of living So the point is to know what kind of fascism do we exactly fight. If we fight only the racism of the 1930s, perhaps we are falling off target.

N.K. We are in a period when, let's say, the utopias of the past, for example communism or liberalism are falling down. Communism was destroyed after the fall of the Soviet Union, and liberalism faces problems nowadays. After the collapse of the narratives of the past, like communism or liberalism that has been proven unable to maintain their foundations and maintain a way of life, traditional movements fell apart, as well. What could inspire a popular movement again?

J.R. Well, I' m not an adviser of popular movements but perhaps we are wrong when we think there was the big narrative and now there is no big narrative. My point also about the history of emancipation, of revolutionary ideas, is that what was called the big narrative was in fact a conjunction of several narrative lines. It is what I tried to show when dealing with the workers' emancipation movements which were inspired by a multiplicity of various experiences, trajectories and encounters. It is always the inegalitarian prejudice that thinks that people were just driven by a big narrative and a naïve faith that later collapsed, no. I think that always there is a multiplicity of experiences of equality, freedom or emancipation that still go on or have found new ways and new forms of expression. And this was proven in the occupy movements of the squares. There was a moment when everybody said that everything had collapsed but it was not true. I think equality, freedom, emancipation and even communism can still

inspire people. But this presupposes, from my point of view, that we give new strength and a new definition to what democracy means. What was important in the movements of the recent years was the idea of real democracy. Real democracy is opposed to the fake democracy practiced by our oligarchic states. But it also means, an effort to create forms of discussion and decision but also forms of life making it possible to give a new strength to equality, freedom and democracy, thinking them not anymore like in the Marxist tradition as a kind of superstructure or surface hiding the reality of domination. So, from the movements that have happened, everywhere, it is possible to create, at least at the level of thinking, a kind of different space. By saying there is not only on the one hand the dead utopias of the past and on the other hand just the resignation to what the bourgeois power called "democracy". This is why the idea of real democracy, real forms of acting freely and equally in common is quite important now.

N.I. We here all have an involvement in the movement, your generation from the 60s, mine from the '70s, Alexandros' from the '90s, the rest from the 2000s. And we share the same experience, that the important thing is the logic of real democracy. Our effort is to instill this democratic element in social movements and our question is, should we continue to do this through our involvement in social movements or should we try to form some kind of political organization or instrument and what could be the dangers of it? We see examples like Varoufakis' effort to make a coalition from above with no roots in the movements or trying to represent something, without actually participating.

J.R. The question is what does" political instrument" mean. Political instruments most of the time take on the form of the party, either the party to gain political seats in the Parliament, or the party as the avant-garde preparing the revolution for the next century. Well, the point today is trying to think a form of political organization as really creating a new form of people. Because a people is not the reality that parties

"represent", it is the reality that they create. The problem is whether we can create a new kind of people, a people of equals who have the possibility to put the capacity of anybody at work. On the one hand it rests on "local" and specific initiatives such as the development of the free social spaces, but it also supposes the unifying force of a common agenda, of a program, which is not a catalogue of electoral promises but an autonomous program of action inventing its own forms. This supposes that you can intervening in relation to what happens in the official "political" sphere – which is the sphere of state power – but not inside its logic. This is why, for instance, I said that perhaps Nuit Debout should have resulted in a movement against the presidential election. Not result into a party, into a new "left of the left" party, but result in a kind of movement to contest the presidential elections. My idea – of course, one can say it is a kind of anarchist idea of an individual – was that one of the outcomes of the movement would have been really to intervene and block this process of primary elections, which is supposed to be the utmost implementation of democracy. While many people wanted to 'radicalize" the movement by direct action and identify direct action with breaking shop windows and bank automats, it would have been more interesting to break the urns of the primary elections. I really think that it must be possible to have a kind of public action, addressing public issues, not as it is defended by the State, but in a different way and not in the perspective of the elections and of electoral program.

Well, of course I know that something like this political form I am trying to outline has not occurred anywhere but it is really, for me, the only way to preserve an autonomous democratic power. I think that trying to create a so-defined autonomous political program is better than trying to transform the movement into a new "left of the left" electoral party, because these things have constantly proved what they could do and you know it in Greece better than in any other place. It is also better than trying to create a new avant-garde party or these kind of things.

Y.K. So, thank you very much. I know you are tired. Thank you very much for your presence at B-Fest 6 and for the conversation. It has been a great experience for all of us.

